Left Realism and Crime

Since the early 1980s a number of sociologists have developed a perspective on crime and deviance usually referred to as left realism. Among the most prominent supporters of this perspective are Jock Young, John Lea, Roger Matthews and Richard Kinsey. Left realism originated in Britain, but has begun to influence criminologists in other countries, including Australia and Canada. Left realist criminologists are critical of perspectives which see longer sentences and more prisons as the solution to crime, but they also oppose the views of what they term ‘left idealists’. In their view, this includes a variety of Marxists, Neo-Marxists and radical feminists.

Politically, left realists tend to see their approach as being close to the position of the British Labour Party. Lea and Young (1984) describe themselves as socialists and support the reform of society rather than the revolutionary change advocated by some Marxists. They argue that right-wing politicians in industrial capitalist societies have been particularly successful in presenting themselves as the parties representing the forces of law and order.

One of the basic tenets of left realism is that crimes other than white-collar crimes are a serious problem and they need to be explained and tackled. Left realists counter a number of arguments which criminologists have advanced to suggest that such crimes are not serious. Note how this differs from classic Marxist perspective. Jock Young (1993) argues there has been a real and significant increase in street crime since World War Two. According to this view, criminology has undergone an aetiological crisis (or crisis of explanation), resulting from the rapid increase in officially recorded street crime in most democratic industrial societies. ie. Sociology has not adequately answered the question: Why do people commit crime?

Some sociologists have advanced the view that the chances of being the victim of street crime are minimal. Lea and Young (1984) point out that, while the average chances of being a victim are small, particular groups face high risks. It is not the rich who are the usual targets of muggers or thieves, but the poor, the deprived, ethnic minorities or inner-city residents. Crime is widely perceived as a serious problem in urban areas and this perception has important consequences. Left realists have carried out a considerable amount of victimization studies, examining such issues as the extent of crime and attitudes towards crime. In the second Islington Crime Survey no less than 80.5% of those surveyed saw crime as a problem affecting their lives. Lea and Young (1984) attack the idea that offenders can sometimes be seen as promoting justice.

Left realists do not deny the importance of white-collar crime. Recent victimization studies carried out by left realists have started to include questions on such crimes, and they accept that they are commonplace and serious. While they take the crimes of rich and powerful groups seriously, left realists do not claim that less rich and powerful groups are unlikely to be involved in serious crime. Left realists also acknowledge the importance of other crimes which tend to be emphasized by left-wing and feminist criminologists, and perhaps neglected by the police, e.g. domestic violence, rape, green crimes, prostitution and trafficking.

In ‘What is to be done about law and order’ (1984), Lea and Young began to develop an approach to explaining criminality. They see crime as rooted in social conditions and argue that crime is closely connected to deprivation. However, they reject those views which suggest that factors such as poverty and unemployment can be seen as directly responsible for crime.

Lea and Young (1984) believe deprivation will only lead to crime where it is experienced as relative deprivation. A group experiences relative deprivation when it feels deprived in comparison to other similar groups, or when its expectations are not met. It is not the fact of being deprived as such, but the feeling of deprivation which is important. Relative depravation has increased in the UK over the last 20 years.

The second key concept Lea and Young use is that of subculture. They see subcultures as the collective solution to a group’s problems. Thus, if a group of individuals share a sense of relative deprivation, they will develop lifestyles which allow them to cope with this problem. However, a particular subculture is not an automatic, inevitable response to a situation; Human creativity will allow a variety of solutions to be produced.

The third and final key concept is that of marginalization. Marginal groups are those which lack organizations to represent their interests in political life, and which also lack clearly defined goals. Lea and Young argue that marginal groups in society are particularly prone to the use of violence and riots as forms of political action.

Left realist criminologists pay considerable attention to practical ways in which the problem of crime might be reduced. In Losing the Fight Against Crime (1986), Richard Kinsey, John Lea and Jock Young put forward a variety of suggestions about ways of changing policing. Lacking the information that is necessary to solve crime, the police resort to new policing methods. They drift towards what Kinsey, Lea and Young call military policing. Without the support of the community, the police have to resort to tactics such as stopping and searching large numbers of people in an area or using surveillance technology to find suspects. This leads to the mobilization of bystanders. It also causes unrest.

How can police improve their performance and begin to clear up more crime? Kinsey, Lea and Young argue the key to police success lies in improving relationships with the community so that the flow of information on which the police rely increases. To achieve this, they propose that minimal policing should be used. Although he has argued that the public should establish priorities for the police, Jock Young has also identified areas which he believes are over-policed and under-policed. In other words, he thinks that the police and the state devote too much of their time and energy to dealing with certain types of crime, and not enough to others. This ‘approach’ to policing distorts the stats as to the true nature of crime. Where crime is committed and who commits crime.

Left realists have not tended to say a great deal about how the wider social causes of crime, such as excessive income inequality, can be tackled. They have concentrated on suggesting shorter-term and more readily available ways of reforming institutions. However, such proposals are not limited to the police.

In recent years the many facets of crimes have been brought together into one theoretical approach to the understanding of crime. This has been called the square of crime, which has four elements:

The state and its agencies; the offender and their actions; informal methods of social control (sometimes called ‘society’ or the ‘public’) and the victim.

Left realists believe that crime can only be understood in terms of interrelationships between these four elements. The idea that crime is socially constructed, that social factors determine who and what are considered criminal, is nothing new. Labelling Theorists, phenomenologists and Marxists all agree this is the case. The idea that crime needs to be examined from different angles is not new either.

Crime by its very nature is a product of formal and informal rules, of actions by offenders, and of reactions by victims and the state and its agencies. It is therefore important to try to understand why people offend, what makes the victims vulnerable, the factors that affect public attitudes and responses to crime, and the social forces that influence the police.

In his most recent writing (1999, 2002) Jock Young has built upon left realist criminology but broadened the issues addressed and changed aspects of his approach. While this work uses a number of ideas from left realism (for example, the idea of relative deprivation), it also has significant differences from Young’s earlier work. It suggests somewhat more radical solutions to the problems of crime in contemporary society than left realism. This work is not so concerned with practical and limited proposals to reduce the problem of crime. It relates crime to major structural changes in society and is less concerned with the details of how particular crimes might be explained. Young has related the problem of crime to the nature of modernity and the issue of social exclusion. In doing so he has looked both at the causes of crime and different social reactions to crime.

Young argues that in the last third of the twentieth century a shift took place in advanced industrial societies from inclusive to exclusive societies. Following Giddens, Young sees this as a move from the era of modernity to the era of high modernity (Young also uses the term ‘late modernity’ interchangeably with the term ‘high modernity’).

According to Young, a major reason for rising crime rates in the exclusive society of high modernity is the problem of relative deprivation. Both absolute and relative deprivation was present in the Golden Age of modernity, but they were less intense. There are a number of reasons for this. While living standards generally have risen, inequality between the richest and poorest has increased. In a globally competitive capitalist economy, the rewards for the most successful are astronomical. Marketization places greater emphasis on individual material success and intensifies the feeling of deprivation experienced by the less successful. Young develops this idea by arguing that high modernity produces high levels of cultural inclusion for all members of society, but combines this with social and economic exclusion. While relative deprivation is greatest at the bottom of the social structure, it is not confined there. Many of those who have achieved some success feel deprived. In part this is because the ideology of meritocracy, which suggests everybody gets what they deserve, contrasts with the reality of ‘chaos in the market of rewards’. Does this explain why people commit crime?